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Faith and Needs: A View from the Christian (Protestant) Church

By Edmund Fong

SYNOPSIS

This essay underscores the importance of the church's roles in meeting the congregants' spiritual and societal needs, drawing parallels with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and suggesting ways for building a more robust and cohesive Singapore society.

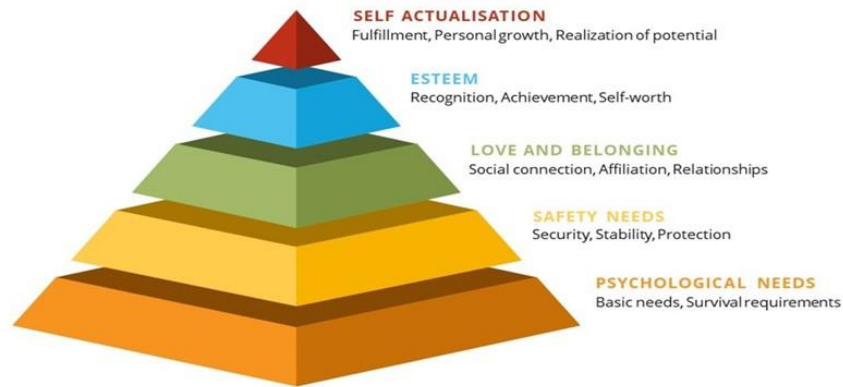
COMMENTARY

We live in an unstable world today. The COVID-19 pandemic, regional conflicts, and the changes brought about by technology and social media have disrupted our way of life, whether in the workplace or at home. Naturally, these challenges affect our psychological well-being and how we engage with one another. In culturally plural societies, religious faith protects its members especially when it pertains to belongingness and spirituality.

Faith and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

To understand how religious faith supports our needs as individuals, families, communities, and society, we can relate it to Maslow's hierarchy of needs [See Figure 1]. Peoples' needs range from "physiological needs", at the most basic, to "safety needs", "love and belonging" needs, "esteem" needs, and at the top of the hierarchy, "self-actualisation" needs. However, events in recent years have reshaped our needs in unexpected ways.

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Reference: Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row.

The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, affected our needs at all five levels of Maslow's hierarchy to varying degrees. Society was hit hardest at the second and third levels, i.e., our needs for "safety" and "love and belonging". While the assistance provided by the Singapore Government, including vaccinations, medical subsidies, hospital treatments, and the Job Support Scheme, helped to address gaps at the ["safety needs" level](#), the role played by Christian faith communities was more impactful at the "love and belonging" level.

At the onset of the pandemic, the churches in Singapore focused on maintaining continuity and connection by following a new routine in the spiritual worship of God. Worship services were held virtually via Zoom during the "circuit breaker" period, with pastors preaching from their homes. At a later stage, key church personnel were allowed to go to church to pre-record or live-stream services.

Being able to see the sanctuary or church hall gave the online audience a [comforting](#) sense of familiarity and intimacy. As social distancing rules were relaxed, church volunteers acted as "call ambassadors" to establish contact with congregants in small groups, providing pastoral care and conveying letters from the senior pastor to maintain that personal touch. This routine helped to forge friendships and build community bonds to augment the fewer core activities maintained by the church during the pandemic.

The Evolving Landscape in the Practice of the Christian (Protestant) Faith

The world has changed much since the pandemic, and the church is not immune to the transformation. Church attendance and the pattern of engagement with attendees have evolved, and the end of COVID-19 movement restrictions did not see church engagement returning to pre-pandemic levels.

In [State of the Church: Singapore 2022](#), a joint study conducted by three seminaries and a Christian publication, it was reported that, in comparison with pre-pandemic times, the number of church attendees had decreased for two-thirds (67 per cent) of the churches surveyed, with 41 per cent of all churches seeing a substantial decrease.

Churches that reported an increase in their attendee numbers tended to be smaller, i.e., having less than 250 attendees each before the pandemic. Larger churches with more than 2,000 attendees each reported significant reductions in attendees after the pandemic. Significantly, participating churches reported that over 12,000 of their regular attendees had gone on to other churches' service regularly.

Overall, 65 churches reported more outflow than inflow of their onsite attendees, while 55 churches reported the reverse. Churches experiencing greater outflow than inflow tended to be at least medium size. It was significant that those with a high proportion of young adults tended to receive attendees – presumably other young adults – from other churches, and their numbers grew.

As for staff members beyond the volunteers, full-time ministry staff increased from 1,189 to 1,234, while non-ministry staff increased from 915 to 947. This increase was not uniform across all churches. Churches that reported an increase in staffing tended to be “young-adult” heavy, had a net inflow of attendees, and had an overall rise in attendees than before the pandemic. In contrast, those with a decrease in staffing reported a significant decline in attendees.

There were mixed findings on the model of engagement with “cell or small group meetings”, “prayer meetings”, and “online outreach meetings” seeing an increase in participation, and “serving in church” and “in-person outreach” meetings seeing a decrease.

Pastoral care and outreach engagements have been expanded, with most churches (88 per cent) exploring new ways of caring for their members, and half of the churches initiating new ways to reach out to their immediate neighbourhood and to other communities.

Drivers for Spiritual Worship

What has led to the changes noted among the young attendees? Were they driven by the pandemic or by other macro-level forces? According to the *State of the Church* study, the quality of preaching is the most influential factor that drew young congregants to the church.

Churches that drew a net inflow of attendees tended to augment their worship services with follow-on conversations, such as small group discussions when congregants met during the week. This well-received activity was accompanied by their desire for a “strong pulpit”, a faith leader that can inspire both spiritual and intellectual development of their followers.

Notably, the study also noted that congregants were attracted to churches that paid attention to pastoral care and community building, supplemented by small, intimate group discussions and a more accessible, personal, and relatable leadership model.

Several push factors were said to have nudged younger attendees to switch churches. The most compelling of these was dissatisfaction with the preaching ministry. Interviews revealed that the younger attendees felt that either the preaching of the Bible in their churches was “watered down” or not aligned with their theological

convictions. Other push factors included a rigid church culture that did not encourage questioning.

Nascent signs of this demographic makeover were noted before the COVID-19 pandemic, but its impact, including that of the “circuit breaker,” had accelerated the migration of congregants.

What are the Takeaways?

The pandemic has primed the church to reflect on its corporate role as a faith community, even if that reflection means frequently reviewing how it can nurture and grow the spirituality of its congregants at both the individual and corporate levels.

For the congregants, the spiritual experience made possible by the church was akin to attaining Maslow’s hierarchy of needs at all levels. They desired connections and purpose for their work as individuals as much as it was part of a collective spiritual worship. The challenge for the church in Singapore lies in meeting these needs while not capitulating to the pressures of a consumerist culture among its congregant members.

We must also reflect on the church’s role as a corporate faith community in society. The sudden adoption of new technology to provide an alternative way of community worship forced by the pandemic has opened up vistas previously unexplored and never contemplated. Smaller churches can continue to use online platforms to attract new congregants through practices that align with their behavioural routines, egalitarian values, and psychological aspirations.

The church has an important role in helping its congregants attain Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In this way, it contributes to a more robust and cohesive Singapore society.

Rev Dr Edmund Fong lectures in Theology (Doctrine), Biblical Interpretation, and Presbyterianism at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. He is an ordained minister of The Presbyterian Church in Singapore and an Associate Minister at Adam Road Presbyterian Church.
